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Teaching cross-cultural communication issues – a way of successfully integrating into the multicultural knowledge society

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Abstract

Since one of the purposes of education in the 21st century is our coping with the multicultural knowledge society, we have to prepare to acknowledge its differences in terms of cultural values, communication and behaviour patterns, habits and attitudes. This theoretical paper argues that an English language course in a technical university should aim at developing the students' awareness of cultural differences, their communicative and cultural competence. The argument lies in the fact that cross-cultural understanding and cultural knowledge for politically-correct approaches are key issues to be considered for a safe and successful integration into our multicultural knowledge society.

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1. Introduction

As stated in the abstract above, the aim of this theoretical paper is to evince the necessity of assigning a high priority to teaching cultural issues in an English language course in a technical university in order to develop the engineering students' cross-cultural awareness and communicative competence. The paper rationale stems from the fact that our multicultural society urges teachers and students to pave their educational way for cross-cultural understanding and cooperation, for respecting other cultural values and for taking politically-correct approaches.

Teachers and students lay the groundwork for coping with the knowledge society, which is multicultural, multilingual and sensitive to politically incorrect approaches. If we are not knowledgeable about the basic communication and behaviour-related rules pertaining to the cultures we encounter, we cannot successfully fit in the knowledge society. Just building it from a technological and from an epistemological point of view is not enough.

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To be an important and active part of it, we have to learn its rules and act according to them. Whether we succeed or not in integrating into it, depends on our education and determination to adapt to its heterogeneous aspect by getting informed and by taking politically-correct linguistic and behavioural approaches, which we learn and brush up on. Acknowledging our present knowledge society, associated with the fast technological progress, the internet culture and the fast global communication, we constantly demonstrate our cognitive and linguistic capacity to make sense of this world, to feel an essential part of it and to further revolutionize it. Our linguistic and behavioural mode of expression, our attitude towards using certain instances of language for building professional cross-cultural relations contribute to our successful integration into the knowledge society nowadays.

In “Teaching Language in Context”, Alice Omaggio Hadley (2001), who quotes Galloway (1985b), Lafayette and Strasheim (1981), remarks that language and cultural issues should be taught inseparably in order to cope with the multicultural world whose understanding ensures our secure and peaceful existence: “The need for a strong commitment to the development of cultural understanding within the language program is clear, particularly in the light of recent developments both nationally and internationally. (...) The valuing of ethnic and cultural diversity must continue to be a high priority in education as our students learn to live in an increasingly interdependent world. There is no question that the successful integration of culture and language teaching can contribute significantly to general humanistic knowledge, that language ability and cultural sensitivity can play a vital role in the security, defense, and economic well-being of this country, and that global understanding ought to be a mandatory component of basic education (Galloway 1985b; Lafayette and Strasheim 1981; Strasheim 1981)” (Hadley, 2001, pp. 345-346).

In the light of the above-mentioned idea, the students’ foreign language competence should include a cultural competence associated with one’s ability to act correctly, responsibly and respectfully towards different interlocutors pertaining to other cultures. To accomplish this goal, we should permanently enhance our knowledge of other cultural values in order to facilitate cross-cultural understanding and cooperation with our foreign interlocutors. By developing cultural competence, the students will develop “strategic competence” defined by Canale and Swain (1980, p. 30) as “verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication” (Canale and Swain, 1980, p. 30 qtd. in Johnson, 2008, p. 38). Referring to “strategic competence”, Keith Johnson (2008, p.38) argues that “this is a very important type of competence for the learner to develop, because they will inevitably face many breakdowns in communication when struggling to use the foreign language with their restricted linguistic resources. (...) There is some evidence that strategic competence will develop by itself, as long as the learner is exposed to communicative situations”(Johnson, 2008, pp. 38-39). Linguistic competence, cultural competence and “strategic competence”, as defined by Canale and Swain (1980), should be developed together for enabling the students to successfully cope with the multicultural knowledge society nowadays.

2. An Engineering Student’s Perspective on the Knowledge Society

A first year student in a Department of Computers in a technical university would claim that his future enlarged knowledge of his specific domain, his future developed technical skills and abilities, and his advanced knowledge of a foreign language would be enough for him to integrate into the knowledge society by enabling him to find a good job and to perform his career duties as required. An engineering student’s educational concerns and purposes do not include his interest in enhancing his knowledge of other cultural values, of other language and behaviour-related approaches. To him, language knowledge is a sufficient tool for accomplishing his career goals, developing his linguistic competence with a view to successfully integrating into the knowledge society. His perspective on achieving success in our society is limited to being knowledgeable and competent in a specific technical domain, and to understanding a foreign language for his specific purposes.

An engineering student should realize that he needs more than knowledge of a foreign language for specific purposes. He needs to understand the importance of learning to appropriately cope with the different cultural contexts and values he can encounter in his multicultural social and work environment. As Hadley (2001) points out, “students often approach target culture phenomena assuming that the new patterns of behaviour can be understood within the framework of their own native culture. When cultural phenomena differ from what they expect, students often react negatively, characterizing the target culture as ‘strange’ or ‘weird’” (Hadley, 2001, p. 347).

Unless made aware of the importance of developing his language skills and cross-cultural awareness for politically-correct approaches in our knowledge society, he will not feel at ease and safe, he will not come to terms with the cross-cultural differences in a society where competition is not only beaten by up-to-the-minute business strategies but also by well-planned communication strategies according to different cultural and situational contexts. Communication strategies adapted to cross-cultural differences are to be learnt in time, in school courses and, later on, based on our own experience at work and in our social life.

Language teachers have to cope with the challenge of designing attractive, interactive courses for teaching cross-cultural communication issues to engineering students, who are especially concerned with creating and developing new technology, with research in their technical field. Engineering students build the knowledge society from a technological point of view. They are less inclined to plan communication strategies and less aware of the potential pitfalls awaiting them in their future multicultural work environment. They have to be informed of the importance of learning and understanding the basic details about their peers' different culture in order to successfully cope with the inevitable cross-cultural communication issues.

3. An English Language Syllabus for Engineering Students of the 21st Century: Teaching Cross-Cultural Communication Issues for Successfully Integrating into the Multicultural Knowledge Society.

In order to enhance the students' awareness of the positive or the negative impact their attitude, behaviour and knowledge can have on their use and choice of language and in order to develop their positive thinking of different cultural issues for enabling them to build successful professional relationships across cultures, we have to design an appropriate English language syllabus. Teaching and learning a foreign language implies teaching and learning a new mode of thinking and of approaching cultural issues, a new mode of behaviour and social interaction. In the chapter entitled "Motivation in foreign and second language learning", Marion Williams and Robert L. Burden (1997) argue for this point, claiming that "the learning of a foreign language involves far more than simply learning skills, or a system of rules, or a grammar; it involves an alteration in self-image, the adoption of new social and cultural behaviours and ways of being, and therefore has a significant impact on the social nature of the learner" (Williams and Burden, 1997, p. 115).

Since motivation plays an important part in a successful English language course focusing on cross-cultural communication issues, we should attach a major importance to increasing the students' capacity to reflect on different cross-cultural instances of communication and behaviour, to make comparisons between different types of communicative approaches including their own culture. With a view to designing a motivating and thought-provoking syllabus for teaching English language and culture in a technical university, we put forward the necessity of starting it with a focus on defining the concepts of "culture", "cultural identity", "multiculturalism", "multicultural knowledge society" and laying emphasis on the students' own culture and patterns of communication in their academic or business contexts, asking them to present and enlarge upon them in organized class discussions through group-work or pair work activities. The next syllabus guidelines are meant to enable the students to acknowledge and evaluate cultural differences, to empathize with other cultures, to enhance their motivation to learn and their ability to act in line with the rules of the culture they will encounter in their lifelong work and social experience:

1. Defining the concepts of "culture", "cultural identity", "multiculturalism", "cultural stereotype", "acculturation", "knowledge society".
2. A brief introduction to the Romanian language and culture. Tips for successful communication and behaviour: addressing your interlocutor, eye-contact, conversation topics, silence, punctuality, humour. Romanian life and institutions. Holidays. Religious holidays.
3. Defining English as the language of victory in the knowledge society. Talking about its influence on the Romanian language and culture. English life, civilization, institutions and holidays.
4. The prerequisites of building a professional relationship across cultures. Case studies.
5. Acknowledging cross-cultural differences in terms of behaviour and patterns of communication.
Discussing communication issues across different cultures based on written materials, documentaries, movies.
6. Focusing on vocabulary. Verbs and adjectives associated with relations in a multicultural environment.

The coursebook “English for Professional Communication” (Blandu et al, 2004, pp. 10-12, 15-17) approaches this subject in Unit 1, “Building a professional relationship across cultures”, including tasks which evince the idea that crucial mistakes are inevitable unless one gets informed and aware of cultural differences. As this idea constitutes an important landmark in coping with the multicultural knowledge society, this unit in the above-mentioned textbook will be thoroughly enlarged upon by the engineering students studying English in a technical university.

To provide resources for running successful language courses concerned with one’s cross-cultural understanding of different patterns of behaviour and communication, Hadley (2001, pp. 348-349) quotes Galloway’s “characterization of four common approaches to teaching culture”: “1. The Frankenstein Approach: a taco from here, a flamenco dancer from there, a gaucho from here, a bullfight from there. 2. The 4-F Approach: Folk dances, festivals, fairs, and food. 3. The Tour Guide Approach: The identification of monuments, rivers, and cities. 4. The ‘By-the-Way’ approach: Sporadic lectures or bits of behaviour selected indiscriminantly to emphasize sharp differences” (Galloway, 1985b qtd. in Hadley, 2001, pp. 348-349). All of these approaches should be adopted and combined with analyses of case studies regarding one’s failure to understand other foreign interlocutors due to a lack of cultural understanding. Such case studies can be searched for on the internet archive or in textbooks dealing with this subject. Such a textbook is “English for Professional Communication” (Blandu et al., 2004, pp. 19-20), whose Unit 1 introduces three awkward situations an Eastern European student goes through while spending two years in Lancaster. The students are asked to discuss what went wrong in the three situations, who was to blame for the confusion and the awkward event. Following this analysis and discussion, the students will understand that by getting informed about the other’s culture – the other’s language, eating habits, conversation habits, ways of saving resources, responding to invitations, eye contact etc. – we avoid the risk of making mistakes, of feeling confused and embarrassed, and we can act responsively, respectfully and tolerantly towards that culture. At this point it is worth adding Hadley’s remarks that “becoming aware of our own biases and helping students to recognize theirs are thus important first steps in teaching for cultural understanding in our classrooms” (Hadley, 2001, p. 354).

Designing an appropriate syllabus, selecting appropriate materials and methodology for teaching English language and culture in a technical university with a view to developing the engineering students’ cross-cultural understanding, constitutes a challenge for language teachers as they have to enhance everyone’s motivation to learn and communicate. Language teachers should find up-to-date written and visual materials on cross-cultural communication issues to be debated in the language courses. As Sandra Lee McKay (2002) points out, “first, the materials should be used in such a way that students are encouraged to reflect on their own culture in relation to others, thus helping to establish a sphere of interculturality. Second, the diversity that exists within all cultures should be emphasized. And finally, cultural content should be critically examined so that students consider what assumptions are present in the text and in what other ways the topic could be discussed” (McKay, 2002, p. 100).

4. Methodology

In order to develop the engineering students’ communicative strategies and awareness of the importance of getting informed about the basic rules of communication and behaviour pertaining to the different cultures they can encounter in their future work environment, in their academic and social life, the focus will be on the communicative method of teaching a foreign language, which implies an interactive, cooperative learning and teaching. By encouraging the engineering students to use English in given real-life contexts of communication and by developing their speaking, reading, writing and listening skills, we enhance their ability to cope with the heterogeneous knowledge society replete with dangerous communication pitfalls unless tackled and avoided appropriately. The students and the teachers’ attitudes towards various types of interlocutors pertaining to various cultures will be changed and revalued. They will understand other cultural values, will appreciate them and will respond to them in a politically-correct manner. As Marion Williams and Robert L. Burden (1997) show in “Psychology for Language Teachers: A Social Constructivist Approach”, this point reflects the purpose of humanistic education. They remark that “humanistic teaching, therefore, is not just learner-centred, but person-centred. A teacher’s view of teaching mirrors her view of herself and her teaching behaviour reflects her essence as a person. One natural consequence of taking such an approach is that we have to accept that teaching is an

expression of values and attitudes, not just information or knowledge. Another consequence is that teachers must recognize that they themselves are constantly involved in a lifelong process of learning and change.” (Williams and Burden, 1997, p. 63).

Cooperative learning and teaching contributes to encouraging the students’ independent thinking, enabling them to find their own meanings and solutions to the situations encountered, to understand the interlocutor’s attitudes and manners of communication, and to act responsively in the given communication situation. Thus, learners will advance their own knowledge and understanding of other cultures by sharing ideas in well-organized pair or group-work activities under the teacher’s careful supervision. Williams and Burden (1997) point out the idea that “every learner will bring a different set of knowledge and experiences to the learning process, and will ‘construct’, in different ways, their own sense of the situation with which they are faced. An individual’s understanding of the world is constantly being reshaped as he or she adapts existing knowledge to new information. Rather than being seen as something that is fixed or static, knowledge is viewed as transitory, provisional and relative”. (Williams and Burden, 1997, p. 96). Therefore, learning should be a lifelong process of building upon our existing cultural information in order to cope with the present challenges including knowledge of our world, mentality, manners of behaviour and communication.

Preparing group-work tasks which ask students to ponder on their own culture, to acknowledge cultural differences and to tell their opinions on the ways of promoting and strengthening relations in a multicultural environment, we stimulate their independent thinking and broaden their understanding of other cultures. The following tasks could be useful for enhancing the students’ ability to investigate cultural differences and for revising grammar in a given communicative context:

Group Work Activity. Task 1

“What cultural tips would you give to a foreigner who will soon visit your country about: eye-contact, physical contact when talking to people, conversation, humour, punctuality, addressing people, silence, business entertaining” (Blandu et al., 2004, p. 14, Task 7).

Group Work Activity. Task 2

Situation: A 4th year engineering student is invited to Aberdeen, Scotland to give a series of presentations on a revolutionary software application he has developed. He will deliver these presentations in two companies and in a school in Aberdeen. He will spend three weeks in Scotland.

- 1) Answer the questions: Should he learn any details about the Scottish culture in order to avoid offending the Scottish or embarrassing situations? If working or dealing with people of different cultures, is it important to know details about their culture in order to establish a professional relationship? Enlarge upon your viewpoints.
- 2) Come up with at least five conditional sentences for each pattern below:
 Conditional 1: If he (+ present simple)....., he (+ the future).....
 e.g. If he learns / prepares / shows, he will avoid / understand.....
 Conditional 2: If he (+ past simple)....., he (+ would+infinitive)
 e.g. If he knew / looked at, he would behave / understand

Tasks which ask students to acknowledge their own cultural values, attitudes, mentality as different from other cultural values, tasks which require students to analyse certain contextual situations, to predict possible future communication issues, to think of solutions to possible cross-cultural issues to be encountered based on given scenarios will generate motivation to communicate and will enhance their cross-cultural awareness. To argue for this point, Sandra Lee McKay (2002) remarks that “since (...) one of the major reasons for using EIL is to enable speakers to share their ideas and culture with others in cross-cultural encounters, it is beneficial for learners to be asked to reflect on their own culture in relation to others, or, as Kramsch puts it, to establish a sphere of interculturality. First, learners need to acquire knowledge about another culture and then they need to reflect on how their own culture contrasts with it” (McKay, 2002, p. 83).

5. Conclusion

Our 21st century multicultural knowledge society urges teachers and students to carefully prepare to cope with its differences by developing their cultural competence and raising their cross-cultural awareness. To accomplish this goal, English language courses in a technical university should not only insist on developing the engineering students' linguistic competence, but should also focus on gaining and increasing cultural competence for enhancing their cross-cultural awareness. Thus, the students will successfully rethink and plan their discourse strategies and communicative approaches according to the different cross-cultural contexts and interlocutors they will have to cope with.

By designing a motivating syllabus and applying the communicative method of teaching, the students will be motivated to learn, demonstrating their capacity to locate and acknowledge cross-cultural differences, knowing how to respond to them in a politically correct manner. Understanding and respecting cultural differences by getting informed about them, by illustrating them and enlarging upon them within course discussions and activities, the students will ensure their safe and successful integration into the multicultural knowledge society.

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